Currituck's Sand Benefits the Total Community

By Tony Cerri

At the November 2 Board of Commissioners meeting, Chairman Paul O'Neal addressed the proposed $35.3 million Corolla beach nourishment project, stating: “It'll be paid for by the people receiving the benefit. So, people on the mainland don't have to worry about being taxed for this.”

Well, I do agree with the principle. Those who benefit should pay. However, I do not agree with Chairman O'Neal's application of that principle or his conclusion. Facts show that mainland Currituck receives significant benefits from Currituck’s beaches and, therefore, should share in the responsibility for protecting them.

This is not about access to the ocean. This is about money and who receives the financial benefits from Currituck's sand.

I'll immediately stipulate that it's inconvenient for a mainland Currituck resident to visit Currituck's beaches, just as it's inconvenient for a 27927 resident to visit the county's YMCA, equestrian center, rural center, senior centers, lighted ball fields, boat ramps, kayak launches, or to send their children to a mainland Currituck school. Geography cuts both ways. Some benefits advantage groups disproportionately.

According to Currituck County's tourism planning documents, visitor spending generated an estimated $3,105 in state and local tax relief per Currituck household, based on 2022 data.[1] That's every household on the mainland as well as in 27927. Analysis of the county's 2026 tax-billing records also found that properties in the three beach tax jurisdictions, encompassing Corolla and Carova, account for approximately 47% of the general county property taxes billed—roughly $25.4 million.[2]

Yet Corolla places relatively modest demands on some expensive county services, particularly public education. Most 27927 K–8 students attend Water's Edge Village School, a successful, public charter school that receives per-student county and state allotments but relies on other funding for its facilities and many operating needs. The thousands of vacation homes that contribute so heavily to the county's property-tax base generate comparatively few year-round schoolchildren. Advantage to the mainland.

The benefits extend well beyond tax revenues and traditional tourism employment. Visit Corolla today, at the beginning of the off-season, and you'll hear hammers and power saws. You'll see a stream of contractors, electricians, plumbers, roofers, landscapers, and trucks delivering building materials. The thousands of vacation homes require construction, renovation, repair, and maintenance, supporting businesses and workers throughout Currituck County. In September 2026, Currituck recorded the lowest unemployment rate of North Carolina's 100 counties, just 2.3%.[3] Beach-based tourism isn't the only reason for that achievement, but it's a massive contributor.

Indeed, Currituck County has actively sought to encourage Corolla visitors to patronize mainland businesses. That's sound economic development policy and recognizes that the beaches generate opportunities far beyond the oceanfront.

Consider what makes all this possible. It's not the horse tours, the fabulous pizza, the lighthouse, the restaurants, or the souvenir shops. The thousands of homes, the property owners, the hundreds of thousands of visitors, and the businesses and jobs they support exist largely because of a relatively narrow strip of sand along the Atlantic Ocean. That narrow strip of sand powers an enormous economy benefiting people throughout Currituck, whether they live on the mainland or in 27927. Protecting it protects an economic powerhouse. Advantage everyone.

The stakes are substantial. Visitors spent approximately $577.6 million in Currituck County in 2025.[4] A decline of just 5% in visitor spending would mean nearly $29 million less flowing into the county's economy annually. That's what's at risk if shrinking beaches and houses falling into the ocean discourage visitation.

Corolla property owners have a large responsibility for nourishment. They receive considerable firsthand benefits and should contribute accordingly. But mainland residents and businesses also benefit financially from Currituck's beaches, even if they seldom visit them. They should contribute accordingly.

The Currituck Board of Commissioners knows these numbers from experience. Further, they were again presented to the Board in September. So why the comment? Politics and votes? Another nudge toward incorporation? Or simply another example of Currituck's longstanding “we/they” divide? Who knows. But rather than perpetuating that divide, shouldn't we be looking for solutions that benefit and build the entire county?

Chairman O'Neal is right that those who benefit from the sand should help pay to maintain it. Currituck's beaches are a countywide asset providing financial benefits to residents on both sides of Currituck Sound. Protecting those beaches should therefore be a countywide responsibility, with costs shared logically and proportionately to the benefits received. After all, money should flow both ways across the Wright Memorial Bridge. I’m happy to crunch numbers and concepts anytime to help make that happen.

Sources

[1] Currituck County Travel and Tourism, 2024–25 Strategic Marketing Plan. Estimated $3,105 in state and local tax relief per household, based on 2022 visitor spending. https://www.visitcurrituck.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/2024-25-Currituck-Travel-and-Tourism-Strategic-Marketing-Plan_final.pdf

[2] Currituck County, 2026 Real Estate and Personal Property Tax Billing File, September 17, 2026. Independent analysis of Poplar Branch Beach, Ocean Sands Water/Sewer, and Fruitville Beach jurisdictions: approximately $25.4 million of $53.8 million in general county property taxes billed (47.21%). Excludes categories not represented in the file, including public utilities.

[3] North Carolina Department of Commerce, September 2026 County and Area Unemployment Figures, released October 28, 2026. Currituck: 2.3%, lowest of 100 counties; not seasonally adjusted. https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/10/28/north-carolinas-september-county-and-area-unemployment-figures-released

[4] Tourism Economics, The Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties, 2025, prepared for Visit North Carolina. Countywide visitor spending approximately $577.6 million. https://www.visitnc.com/industry/research/economic-impact-studies. The 5%, scenario is illustrative calculations, not forecasts.